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No. II.

DRIED PLANTAINS.

The SILVER MEDAL was voted to Captain J. N. COLQUHOUN, R. Art., for his Communication on Dried Plantains, a Sample of which has been placed in the Society's Repository.

THE two principal cultivated species of *Musa*, the *M. paradisiaca* and *M. sapientum*, are commonly known by the names of plantain and banana. It is the former alone which is the subject of Captain Colquhoun's communication; and the specimens laid before the Society were prepared on the western coast of Mexico, where, in this dried state, it is called *Platano pasado*.

The plantain is one of the largest of herbaceous plants, rising to the height of from ten to fifteen feet, and characterised by its long simple firm leaves of a glaucous green, supported on nearly upright footstalks. From eleven to thirteen months is time sufficient for the plant to grow to maturity, and bear its single bunch of fruit, after which it decays and is cut down. Many suckers rise from the old stool, any of which being severed a few inches below the surface, and planted in good moist soil, will speedily take root. It is cultivated at present in all tropical countries, but does not appear to have been an original native of America, having probably been introduced by the Portuguese from their settlements in Africa, and by the Spaniards from the Philippine Islands. It is remarkable for its fertility, for the ease with which it is propagated, and for the little care required in its culti-

vation. In those parts of the West Indies where wheaten bread cannot readily be procured, the fruit of the plantain, gathered at full growth, but before the luscious sweetness which characterises its maturity has begun, becomes its customary substitute. It is consumed in various other forms, and in different stages of ripeness, and constitutes in particular a large proportion of the food of the people of colour. On this account it is very generally cultivated throughout the West Indian islands, and may justly be regarded as one of their staple articles of subsistence, being not only agreeable to the palate, but very wholesome and nutritive.

The object of Captain Colquhoun in placing the specimens before the Society, is to direct their attention to the dried fruit of the plantain, as an article of produce hitherto unknown in the British colonies and in European commerce, which would probably obtain a considerable consumption in this country, and also be very acceptable as a useful and agreeable article of sea stock. It may be produced in our tropical colonies in any required quantity, and at a very moderate price, and therefore seems worthy of a fair trial in our West Indian colonies, especially at the present time, when, from the great change in the situation of the negroes, it may be difficult in many parts to retain the laborious cultivation of the sugar cane.

The sample presented by Captain Colquhoun was brought by him from Mexico, being prepared in the hot country (*Tierra caliente*) of Jalisco and Mechoacan, whence the fruit is sent to the higher parts of Mexico, the temperature of which is too low for the successful cultivation of the plantain.

The mode of its preparation is as simple as possible.

The fruit is gathered when fully ripe, and is laid on light cane frames exposed to the sun. When it begins to shrivel, the outer skin is stripped off,* and then the drying is completed. During this process it becomes covered with a white mealy efflorescence of sugar, as the fig does under similar circumstances. For convenience of transport, it is pressed into masses of about 75 lbs. each, and is wrapped in plantain-leaves. It is evident that the fruit in this state bears precisely the same relation to the fresh plantain that the raisin and dried fig do to the fruits from which they are prepared, and may be expected to keep good as long as either of them. Indeed, Captain Colquhoun's samples, when they came into the possession of the Society, were about two years old, sufficiently moist, of a consistence and flavour between the date and the fig, and very sweet, without any acidity: there are no seeds, the whole of the fruit being eatable.

The recent unprepared plantain will keep good only for a few days, and it is not uncommon in the West Indies and elsewhere to divide it longitudinally, and then to dry it in an oven or in the sun. Dampier, in his *Voyages*, relates that the Darien Indians preserve the plantain for a long time by first washing it, then moulding it into lumps, and afterwards drying it slowly over the fire; but the more perfect mode of preparing it, above described, seems peculiar as yet to Mexico.

Mr. Saintsbury, Secretary to the West Indian Club, informed the Society, that the plantain is at present consumed in a fresh state in all the West Indian islands, except Trinidad, where some plantains are dried; but

* The stripping off the skin is a very essential part of the process, as it acquires an unpleasant flavour by drying.

that these, in flavour and in condition, do not approach the specimens brought from Mexico by Captain Colquhoun.

From Mr. Bourne, a planter of Antigua, the Society learn that the fruit of the plantain is eaten in great quantities in the West Indies by the negroes and other persons. It is gathered when full grown, but before being ripe. It is used at the tables of the planters, being boiled and cooked in various ways. When ripe it is yellow, and becomes so either by being left on the plant for a sufficient length of time, or by being cut when full grown, and then hung up for ten days, at which time the skin is easily stripped off; but he has never seen the plantain dried. A plant produces only one bunch, which sometimes attains the weight of fifty pounds. It is propagated from suckers with the greatest ease, but is not much cultivated by the English planter, being grown chiefly by the negro population on their own provision-grounds. In Nevis and Montserrat are very numerous plantations of it in the ravines of the mountains—a situation and soil which particularly suit it. There is no one season in which the plantain fruits, for it may be found in the markets almost the whole year round. The plant comes to maturity in twelve or fourteen months. The only injury that it is liable to suffer is from violent gales of wind, which overthrow it; but this is in great measure prevented by cutting off the large stiff leaves—and this may be done without any material injury to the fruit. It would, probably, when dried, be very acceptable as sea-stock; and the thick succulent stems are very greedily eaten by hogs, sheep, and other animals on board ship. The stems are also mixed, in certain proportions, with sugar-canes, and passed through the mill together, it

being generally supposed that the juice of the plantain-stem facilitates the clarification of the cane-juice.

From the above evidence, the Society are of opinion that the preparation of dried plantains is worthy of a fair trial in the British West Indies, as being an article likely to enter into competition with figs, and other dried Mediterranean fruit, in the European markets; and, accordingly, they have offered a premium for this purpose, which is inserted in the list of premiums bound up with the present volume, and to which the reader is referred.

The following extract of a letter since received from Captain Colquhoun is added, as containing some further interesting particulars.

Island Bridge, Dublin,

30th May, 1834.

SIR,

I HAVE been making some extracts from Porter's Tables of the Revenue, Commerce, &c. (relating to the subject of the dried plantains), to shew the quantity of dried fruits imported into and consumed in the United Kingdom, and think the particulars will not be uninteresting to you. I have gone back for some years, but the average of the last five, ending with 1832, varies so little from that of the two last of that period, that it is not necessary to go beyond them.

*Quantities of dried Fruits imported into the United Kingdom, and retained for consumption, in 1831 and 1832.
From Porter's Tables.*

	Quantities Imported. Cwts.		Retained for Consump. Cwts.		Net Revenue arising therefrom.	
	1831.	1832.	1831.	1832.	1831.	1832.
Figs	28,772	24,772	20,578	21,393	£22,145	£23,138
Raisins.....	216,283	187,419	162,204	138,305	173,100	148,447
Currants	212,900	165,658	149,018	142,717	330,341	316,697
Prunes and dried Plums }	10,035	4,260	8,641	4,883	10,886	6,713
Totals.....	467,990	382,109	340,441	307,298	£ 536,472	£494,995

The rates of duty in 1831 and 1832, were,—on figs, 21s. 6d. per cwt. ; on raisins of British produce, 10s. per cwt. ; on raisins of the sun, 42s. 6d. ; on others, 20s. ; on currants, 44s. 4d. per cwt. ; and on prunes and dried plums, 27s. 6d. per cwt.

Excluding currants, there has been imported, on the average of the five years ending with 1832, of the other descriptions of fruits, 205,986 cwts. per annum, the value of which, at import prices, and without duties, probably exceeds half a million sterling.

Dates are not mentioned in Porter's tables.

I have stated above the whole quantities of the four principal species of dried fruits, but I do not think the plantain likely to come into direct competition with any other than the fig ; though it is possible it might tend to reduce and supplant, in some small degree, the consumption of raisins and prunes.

The importation of figs in the last five years has been as follows :—

In 1828	Cwts. 27,562	} Total cwts. 123,450. Average per annum, 24,690.
1829	— 21,938	
1830	— 20,406	
1831	— 28,772	
1832	— 24,772	

The average annual quantity retained for home consumption in the same period was 20,441 cwts.

The net revenue in 1832, from the duties upon figs, amounted to 23,138*l*. The probable value of the quantity imported in that year, exclusive of duties (say at 45*s*. per cwt.), was about 55,737*l*.

From all that I can learn, it appears to me that the dried plantain may be expected to be imported from the West Indies, all charges paid, but exclusive of duty, for about 28*s*. per cwt. or 3*d*. per lb. including ten per cent of profit to the grower. This price, it is true, is calculated on the production of Demerara, where the soil is richer than in the Islands; but, on the other hand, the charges are also higher than in the latter.

As a branch of domestic industry, suited to the interests and altered condition of the coloured population, I cannot but regard the drying of the plantain for export with much interest, and as likely to prove important to their welfare; and, if I am not very much out in my data, the statement I send you will shew the probable opening there exists for the produce in question. I am, I confess, confident of good results.

It is a singular circumstance, but one that arises naturally out of the spirit of our colonial policy, and the effect of the encouragement given to the production of sugar, that the plantain should never yet have been thought of for drying for food, and for export in our

islands. I do not know if I told you, that the dried fruit was found on trial, when sliced and boiled in a paste, to make a very good pudding.

I am, Sir, &c. &c.

A. AIKIN, Esq.
Secretary, &c. &c.

J. N. COLQUHOUN,
Capt. Royal Artillery.